



# Alzheimer's Disease

## WHAT IS ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE?

The occurrence of Alzheimer's disease (AD) is not a normal development in the aging process. Alzheimer's disease is characterized by a gradual loss of memory, decline in the ability to perform routine tasks, disorientation, difficulty in learning, loss of language skills, impaired judgment and ability to plan, and personality changes. Over time, these changes become so severe that they interfere with an individual's daily functioning, resulting eventually in death. While the disease can last from 3 to 20 years after the onset of symptoms, the average duration is 8 years.

Alzheimer's disease affects as many as 4 million Americans. Most people diagnosed with AD are older than 65. However, it is possible for the disease to occur in people in their 40's and 50's. Recent research has shown links between some genes and AD, but in about 90% of cases, there is no clear genetic link.

## SYMPTOMS

Alzheimer's disease manifests itself slowly and subtly, with the first symptoms often appearing to be mild forgetfulness. From time to time, we all forget where we have put our keys, but people with early stage AD may notice that they tend to forget things more often. They may have trouble remembering recent events, names of familiar people or things. While these symptoms are bothersome, they are usually not serious enough to cause alarm. As the disease advances, the symptoms become serious enough to cause people with AD or their family members to recognize that things are not right and that help is needed. As the disease progresses further, people with AD eventually forget how to do simple tasks like brushing their teeth, or combing their hair. They begin to

have problems speaking, understanding, reading or writing. Later on, people with AD may become anxious or aggressive and may wander away from home. Eventually, patients may need total care.

## DIAGNOSIS

Early and careful evaluation is important, because many conditions, including some that are treatable or reversible, may cause dementia-like symptoms. Examples of such treatable medical conditions are depression, nutritional deficiencies, adverse drug interactions, and metabolic changes.

There is no single test to identify AD. A comprehensive exam should be conducted by your physician including a complete health history and physical exam, neurological and mental status assessments, as well as other lab tests (like chest x-rays and blood tests). These will help rule out any other diseases which may look like Alzheimer's but are not. Physicians are now able to accurately diagnose 80 - 90% of people who show symptoms of AD. A definitive diagnosis is possible, however, only through the examination of brain tissue at autopsy.

## TREATMENT AND CARE

While there is no known cure for AD, scientists have found a few medications which may help control some of the symptoms. People with AD must work closely with their doctor to determine which drugs and activities are best for them because reaction to medications varies for each person. As researchers continue to learn more about the disease, new possibilities arise. Information about cutting-edge treatments and new scientific discoveries is available from physicians and the sources listed below.

## FAMILY CAREGIVERS

Research has also created promising new approaches for working with persons who have Alzheimer's and their caregivers. Experience has taught families and caregivers new behavioral approaches that encourage greater independence and reduce disturbing behavior. Through the work of the 38 state grantees in the Alzheimer's Disease Demonstration Grant program now funded by the Administration on Aging (AoA), new dementia-specific approaches to early identification, treatment, and community-based care have been developed. These projects have been especially successful in working with low-income, ethnic minority and rural families.

## ADDITIONAL INFORMATION & RESOURCES

For more information about Alzheimer's Disease, services and resources contact:

*National Alzheimer's Association*  
24-hour Toll-Free Nationwide Hotline:  
1-800-272-3900  
Web Site: <http://www.alz.org>

*National Institute on Aging*  
Alzheimer's Disease Education and Referral Center (ADEAR)  
Phone: 1-800-438-4380  
Web Site: <http://www.alzheimers.org>

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

AoA recognizes the importance of making information readily available to consumers, professionals, researchers, and students. Our website provides information for and about older persons, their families, and professionals involved in aging programs and services. For more information about AoA, please contact: US Dept of Health and Human Services, Administration on Aging, Washington, DC 20201; phone: (202) 401-4541; fax (202) 357-3560; Email: [aoainfo@aoa.gov](mailto:aoainfo@aoa.gov); or contact our website at: [www.aoa.hhs.gov](http://www.aoa.hhs.gov)